

Strengthening reputation and trust in the UK pharmaceutical industry

Discussions and recommendations emerging
from the APBI conference on 18 October 2023

January 2024



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Introduction



The response to the COVID-19 pandemic was extraordinary for many sectors – but perhaps for none more than the pharmaceutical industry. Viewed in some areas with suspicion, as a necessary but somewhat opaque contributor to the health sector and as a generator of large profits by large businesses, the industry suddenly became a saviour through the speedy development and distribution of COVID vaccines.

As interest in the industry increased, measures of familiarity and favourability with the general public, MPs, and health organisations soared. But as the vaccines did their job and the world emerged from lockdown, that interest has dissipated.

The ABPI reputation conference on 18 October 2023 brought together experts from academia, industry, government, patient organisations and the NHS to discuss ways in which the industry could harness the lessons learnt during the pandemic, and regain and rebuild the high levels of trust that characterised interactions at that time.

Recognising that increasing familiarity with and trust in the industry is crucial if we are to have the impact we strive for, the conference considered a number of key questions. How can pharmaceutical organisations develop partnerships and collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders to create positive impacts for patients and the NHS? How can we communicate more impactfully and more positively with all our stakeholders, including Government, regulators, and the general public? And how can we do so within the ABPI Code, that has been designed to ensure the highest ethical standards in the industry?

We are grateful for the openness and clarity that participants from all sectors brought to these crucial questions, sharing experiences and – most importantly – helping to shape recommendations for how we can work together to address challenges.

We hope you enjoy reading this report and find it useful.



Dr Richard Torbett
Chief Executive, ABPI

Executive summary



The first ABPI reputation conference took place on 18 October 2023 in Spitalfields, East London. A programme of individual speakers and panel discussions aimed to address industry concerns that, while the public and other stakeholders are moderately positive about pharmaceutical companies, knowledge of what they do and the wider societal value they bring is still not deep-rooted. Recent research shows that, even having demonstrated the extraordinary capability of the industry as a force for good through the development of effective COVID vaccines, there is much work still to be done to build familiarity and trust.

Organisational reputations are built on two dimensions: capability and character. Capability relates to perceptions about how competent a company or sector is, how good it is at making products or delivering services. Character is linked with perceptions about honesty, integrity, and fair dealing. A reputation for capability is enduring, and participants in the reputation conference were confident that stakeholders trusted the capability of the pharmaceutical industry. A reputation for good character, however, can be lost easily. Discussions during the conference surfaced concerns that bad behaviour by individual companies can tarnish the industry as a whole, and that the widespread perception of 'Big Pharma' is that it is motivated purely by profit.

In fact, a sample of purpose statements from pharmaceutical companies revealed them to be clearly purpose-led businesses, where 'purpose' is not a branding statement but the organising principle behind an organisation, and profit is an outcome rather than a driving force. A strong sense of purpose is the foundation stone on which strategy is based. It also provides guardrails, stopping businesses from doing things that they should not be doing, and acts as a North Star, helping prioritise decisions about strategy and investment.

More work needs to be done to make this understood by stakeholders both internally and externally. In tandem, there is potential for greater communication about how medicines are discovered and developed, and about how pharmaceutical companies collaborate successfully with government, the NHS, and other groups such as patient organisations. Increasing familiarity with all aspects of the business will also serve to attract a more diverse pool of talent for the future.

Recommendations that emerged from the conference include:



For the ABPI

- Work with members and with regulators to revisit the Code of Practice to clarify how pharmaceutical companies are able to communicate appropriately about individual medicines and their structure, activities, and purpose. Encourage members to 'own' their successes as well as their mistakes, and to work together and with other stakeholders to increase knowledge of and familiarity with the pharmaceutical industry.



For organisations

- Review and reconnect with your purpose; this is the basis of legitimacy for your business and for the industry as a whole – and a precursor to familiarity and trust. Focus on being trustworthy rather than on seeking to build trust; consider the changes that could be made to the way you run the business to increase transparency and demonstrate trustworthiness.
- Develop communications excellence as a strategic necessity. Use these skills to build stronger partnerships with, for example, the government and the NHS, and communicate the benefits of the pharmaceutical industry. Talk more about what you do to help reduce the NHS backlog and speed up diagnoses, and act quickly and confidently to call out bad behaviour.
- Review hiring, development, and other HR practices to attract diverse talent in all parts of the organisation and to create a welcoming and inclusive environment.



For individuals

- Access advanced media training to increase your confidence in talking to journalists and your ability to control what you are prepared to talk about, including learning ways to handle questions that are outside your expertise.
- Seize opportunities to speak to journalists and use them to educate the public about the process and principles of scientific discovery. This shores up knowledge and balance for when something goes wrong or when there is a scare story.



Panel Discussion:
 The relationship between purpose, familiarity and trust

Chair
 Dr Richard Torbett, Chief Executive, ABPI

Panel
 Susan Rienow, President, ABPI, and Country President, Pfizer UK

Rupert Younger, Founder Director, Oxford University Centre for Corporate Reputation

Tom Fife-Schaw, Research Director, Ipsos

Claire Brading, Managing Director, UK&I, UCB

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Left to right: Dr Richard Torbett - ABPI, Claire Brading - UCB, Tom Fife-Schaw - Ipsos, Rupert Younger - Oxford University and Susan Rienow - Pfizer

Trust and trustworthiness, capability and character



Trust is at the core of the APBI's mission, and that of the whole industry. The APBI cannot fulfil its mission without the trust of its members; and the NHS, Government, and other partners need to trust pharmaceutical companies before they are willing to risk their own reputations by association with them. Trust from the general public – including MPs – is also a necessary part of the collective 'buy-in' that supports companies' societal licence to operate.

Keynote speaker Rupert Younger, Director of the Oxford University Centre for Corporate Reputation at Saïd Business School, explained that organisations are judged on two dimensions: **capability** and **character**. Capability relates to perceptions about how competent a company or sector is, how good it is as making products or delivering services. Character is linked with perceptions about honesty, integrity, and fair dealing.



'The idea of rebuilding trust as a concept I think is problematic. Because it's not about rebuilding trust – trust is an outcome – it's about rebuilding trustworthiness. Trustworthiness demands that you actually do something different. It may be the decision to pay people differently; it may be that you need to change the organisational structures; there may be a series of quite tricky organisational decisions that lie at the heart of trustworthiness, and the outcome of that will be trust.'

Rupert Younger, Director of the Oxford University Centre for Corporate Reputation at Saïd Business School



There is no doubt about the competence of the pharmaceutical industry. It is composed of highly qualified people dealing with significant science and putting years of research into developing medicines that are effective and safe. However, the knowledge that pharmaceutical companies are large, profit-making businesses raises questions, at least in the minds of the general public. Are they more focused on making profits or on making patients better? These questions are compounded when an issue comes to light such as the behaviour of Purdue and other companies in exacerbating the opioid crisis, and can lead to a high degree of scepticism about the character of the entire industry.

As Younger emphasised, a reputation for capability is remarkably 'sticky'; it is very hard to lose. A reputation for good character, on the other hand, can be destroyed in an instant. And while customers care most about capability, the primary impacts of character issues are felt with counterparties: regulators, investors, employees, partners, and suppliers.

For a highly regulated industry, which in the UK does not deal directly with consumers but works in partnership with the NHS, character matters most.

Aligned with trust and reputation is the concept of 'purpose', now familiar to almost every boardroom in the country. 'Purpose' is the organising principle behind an organisation – why it exists, the foundation stone on which strategy is based. It also provides guard rails, stopping businesses from doing things that they should not be doing, and acts as a North Star, helping prioritise decisions about strategy and investment. A sample of purpose statements from pharmaceutical businesses revealed them to be clearly purpose-led businesses, but there were questions about how well this was understood both internally and externally.



Rupert Younger shared the key questions behind the SCORE¹ framework, developed as part of the Enacting Purpose Initiative, and aimed at evaluating whether the intent of purpose is being translated into action:

1. Simplify

Is it simple enough to be understood? Does everyone in the organisation actually understand it?

2. Connect

Does it connect to your strategy? It has to connect to decisions you make about how you operate.

3. Own

Who owns it?

4. Reward

How is it remunerated and rewarded? Are people recruited who share the organisation's values, and are salaries and bonuses linked to achievement of the purpose?

5. Exemplify

Tell stories. When people working in very complex environments start sharing stories of what they have done well, it becomes incredibly powerful.

Key takeaways

- Re-anchor to your purpose: it is your foundation stone and basis of legitimacy as an industry – and a precursor to familiarity and trust.
- Think more carefully about character and capability.
- Communications excellence is a strategic requirement. Thirty years ago, it may have been a 'nice to have', but it is now an essential part of the leadership toolkit.



Building positive opinion in Parliament

Sean Worth, Co-founder & Director, WPI strategy



Public perceptions of the pharmaceutical industry



Although it emerged as one of the 'heroes' of the COVID-19 pandemic, public perceptions of the pharmaceutical industry are mixed. This is mostly due to lack of knowledge.

In the UK, pharmaceutical companies which discover, develop and sell prescription medicines to the NHS are necessarily not consumer-facing, with the result that they are on the periphery of the public's concerns and interests on a day-to-day basis. Even MPs' familiarity with the sector matches that of consumers: they have a broad understanding about how medicines are discovered and made, but little knowledge of the details. How are decisions made? Who decides what medicines to make? How are trials designed?



'An eighteen-year-old in one of our focus groups likened the pharmaceutical industry to Batman. He's a superhero, goes round saving lives. Does lots of good things. But a bit curious, a bit mysterious, a bit opaque. Extremely wealthy.'

Tom Fife-Schaw, Research Director, Ipsos



Prescription medicines are of course only available through clinicians, and even well-known brands are not the names of the companies that develop and manufacture them. Perceptions of the industry are therefore filtered through an intermediary, the NHS, and this can muddy the waters. Difficulties with supply chains can be misinterpreted, for example, as can a GP's recommendation of which medicine to prescribe. A fundamental problem is that many individual consumers feel that they do not have access to effective medicines, or at least the medicines they want, because the NHS cannot afford them. Caring about the NHS is almost part of the national identity in the UK, and everyone is conscious of its cost constraints.

In the absence of real knowledge of how the sector works, and faced with unhelpful labels such as 'Big Pharma', people can assume that the focus of pharmaceutical companies is on profits, not people, and that the sector makes too much profit altogether. There is little understanding of the investment that is needed for research and development, or that it is a public good.

Key takeaways

- ▶ People will fill gaps in knowledge and communication with assumptions and theories of their own. The pharmaceutical industry needs to take control of the narrative, for example in finding ways to 'call out bad apples' and in 'proving' its trustworthiness in the way that the businesses are run, as well as looking ahead to challenges such as Artificial Intelligence (AI).
- ▶ The narrative also needs to change in places. For example, the pharmaceutical industry should position itself as an enabler, taking the pressure off the NHS.
- ▶ It is vital to continue to build trusted partnerships to build resilience as well as present and future value: 'people give you the benefit of the doubt'.





Learning from the COVID experience



The task of developing vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic had the benefit of simplicity, clarity, and alignment of purpose. It was, for a while, seemingly the one and only thing that everyone – Government, public, healthcare organisations, and pharmaceutical companies – cared about.



'The pandemic was a desperate time for all of us. And it was an extraordinary time in our industry. I remember chatting with people in the grocery store who asked where I worked. When I said I worked for Pfizer, people thanked and congratulated me because they knew the company, they understood the hope that science was offering and they recognised that our work is meaningful and important.'

Susan Rienow, President, ABPI, and Country President, Pfizer UK



Part of the success of the COVID response for pharmaceutical companies was that, when communicating about the development of the vaccines, they were not 'going it alone', but working in partnership with the government and other stakeholders. This, they felt, increased their credibility and contributed to their 'character' reputation. They were transparent about the process, fully aware that interest, as well as concern, was high. In fact, industry conference participants explained that they made information available to the public that they would not normally share, such as the structure of clinical trials and even details of supply chains.

In addition, the commitment to 'leaving no patient behind' – ensuring that non-COVID medicines still got to the patients who needed them – did not receive much public attention, but made a big difference to how pharmaceutical companies were viewed by governments and other healthcare organisations. Supply chain issues that were disrupting other industries across the world were not disrupting the pharmaceutical industry.

It was an example of effective global collaboration. But, in science, global collaborations happen every day, as does collaboration between pharmaceutical companies and the NHS. The public, however, remains largely unaware: panellists suggested that medicine is still often seen as a cost, not an investment in the health of the nation.

During a panel discussion, participants considered how to capitalise on the goodwill that was generated throughout the pandemic.

Key takeaways

- Participants felt that companies could be prouder of what they do and talk more about it. For example, they could communicate how they are helping reduce the NHS backlog and speed up diagnoses.
- They asked if the industry as a whole is too generous in sharing its success. It 'owns' its mistakes but is reticent about triumphs. This may be because, as part of a regulated industry, companies are over-sensitive about the potential for complaints or perceptions that they have broken the code of practice.
- The COVID response benefited from clarity and the high profile given by the government. Is there more that can be done with government to communicate the benefits of the pharmaceutical industry? The government could be well incentivised to talk about, for example, levels of investment in healthcare. The NHS also could be a powerful communications partner. This sort of collaboration would be even more powerful if aligned around a similar simple purpose.

Chair:
Neil-Hall, Director, Media and Communications, ABPI

- Engaging with journalists
Fiona Lethbridge, Senior Press Manager, Science Media Centre
- Attracting diverse leaders of the future
Dr Michelle Scott, Head, Labcorp UK and Vice President and Head of Discovery and Biotechnical Solutions
- Case Study: Health equity and diversity
Pauline Hakutangwi, Brand Lead: New Products, Cardiovascular and Renal & DE&I Lead, Novartis

Reputation Event | 19 October 2023



Left to right: Jack Neill-Hall - ABPI, Fiona Lethbridge - Science Media Centre, Pauline Hakutangwi - Novartis and Dr Michelle Scott - Labcorp UK

Effective collaborations for patient benefit



Reputation can be an important and positive output of a successful collaboration, such as those formed during the COVID pandemic. But reputation can also be thought of as an input: different parties in a collaboration may be 'lending' their reputation to others.

The healthcare system as a whole is a complex network of different types of collaboration, with all players protecting their own reputations. Indeed, some stakeholders might draw back from some collaborations through an unwillingness to risk their reputations – to the disbenefit of patients.



'Patient organisations shouldn't disguise what they do with Pharma, we should be proud of our collaborations and the difference we make with industry support to patients' and health professionals' lives. It's all about identifying the issues then being part of the solution by working collaboratively together.'

Clare Jacklin, Chief Executive, National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society



Speakers from patient organisations and secondary healthcare organisations gave examples of highly successful collaborations, in which, for example, funding from a pharmaceutical company supported a project to provide evidence that persuaded the NHS to fund and adopt a new service: a one-stop clinic for patients suffering from a combination of diabetes and cardiovascular disease. This innovative idea, to create somewhere that would give patients time to discuss their condition and optimise their treatment and management, fell outside the normal processes of NHS organisations, where budgets have historically been run according to specialties.

Patient organisations act as the 'voice' of the patient and offer local support, expertise in experience of the disease, and a link with the NHS. They support education and research, often acting as consultant to pharma companies. While they admit that they might not exist without the support of the pharmaceutical industry, concerns about reputation have often led to some self-imposed limits, such as only accepting a certain proportion of funding in order not to be seen as 'in the pockets of the industry'. The ABPI Code of Practice underpins collaborations such as these. It was created to protect the independence of both parties and maintain transparency. It gives a ready-made framework for collaboration, so that partners do not have to work on defining their own principles.

However, patient organisation participants observed that working within the code can be 'soul-destroying': 'Do we need six pages of legal gobbledegook just to get £2000?' Patient organisations are small, with no time and no armies of lawyers. The projects that they want to collaborate on are often not product-related, but about innovation.

There is also a communication challenge: industry funding is reported externally, but not all inputs and collaboration. Being able to discuss these would have reputational benefits for all stakeholders.

Key takeaways

- ▶ Patient organisations and other healthcare organisations are keen to work with pharmaceutical companies, but urge that collaboration should not be initiated just when there is a new product or when 'their' disease is in the news.
- ▶ Companies and other organisations need to embrace the Code of Practice rather than fearing it, but concerns about compliance can drive people down a transactional route. How can organisations strike the balance between innovation, transparency, and the potentially stifling effects of bureaucracy?
- ▶ There is a perception that information resources developed as part of funded projects have been withdrawn after a time in order to comply with requirements of the ABPI Code of Practice. How can organisations ensure that great projects remain scalable and lasting? And how can companies develop non-promotional product-related communications?

Optimisation of the
specific pathway
Professor Stephen Wheatcroft, Consultant
Cardiologist, Leeds Teaching Hos
NHS Trust
Douglas Clark, Head of Medical Affairs,
UK and Ireland, Boehringer Ingelheim

Case study: Optimisation of the
cardiometabolic pathway
Professor Stephen Wheatcroft, Consultant
Cardiologist, Leeds Teaching Hospitals
NHS Trust
Douglas Clark, Head of Medical Affairs,
UK and Ireland, Boehringer Ingelheim



Framing the value of UK pharma to policymakers, government, and the NHS



Policymakers and regulators are interested in the pharmaceutical industry, but their interest is inconsistent and their knowledge can be limited.

Reputation work by most industries is often targeted at MPs. This is important – various Parliamentary committees must be engaged – but can be challenging. Some MPs still think that 'Big Pharma is ripping off the NHS' and some do not pay much attention to the pharmaceutical industry unless there is a scandal or other issue that affects their constituents. This increases familiarity with the industry, but not in a desirable way.



'Just because we have a job to do doesn't mean we have to do it in isolation.'

**Dr Glenn Wells, Chief Partnerships Officer,
Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency**



At a policy level, however, the picture is more positive across all main political parties. There is an increasing interest in economic role of the sector – its potential for growth and ability to attract talent, its potential for innovation and the quality of well paid, stable and productive jobs it provides in research and manufacturing.

The regulator, MHRA (the Medicine and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency), has a statutory function but also provides support for innovation, trying to work across the whole pathway:

So there is a desire for partnership and engagement, but often a degree of reticence among certain stakeholders, arising from lack of knowledge. Speakers asked pharmaceutical companies to bridge this gap through communication, not lobbying. 'Some of us know even less about commercial organisations than you think we do. Please share information to help us understand more'. They also recommended inviting government officials to visit manufacturing and research sites, and asked industry to demonstrate greater understanding of government concerns about geographical inequality – 'Policymakers want to see impact through the whole of the UK.'

Nevertheless, there remains some queasiness or uneasiness about profit and about the high salaries perceived as common in the industry. And while collaboration was lauded during the pandemic, in less extraordinary times it can be seen as secretive and aimed at increasing sales.

Key takeaways

- It is never too early to engage, particularly as policy change can take a considerable amount of time, education and effort.
- Policymakers prefer hearing about solutions to hearing about problems; do not give 'naysayers' any excuses.
- Develop unified industry positions: join together to talk to the government.

Delivering and communicating collaborations for patient benefit

Session chair:
Dr Amit Aggarwal, Executive Director, Medical Affairs & Strategic Partnerships, ABPI

- ▀ **Collaborations and the role of the industry**
Clare Jacklin, Chief Executive, National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society
- ▀ **Case study: Optimisation of the cardiometabolic pathway**
Professor Stephen Wheatcroft, Consultant Cardiologist, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust
Douglas Clark, Head of Medical Affairs, UK and Ireland, Boehringer Ingelheim
- ▀ **Enabling ethical and compliant collaborations**
Alex Fell, Director, Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority

ABPI Prescription Event | 18 October 2023



Delivering and communicating collaborations for patient benefit

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ABPI Prescription Event | 18 October 2023



Connecting with citizens and attracting skills and talent



There is huge public and media interest in science. The traditional media remains a key source of information for the public, even with the proliferation of social media. Indeed, it is often through clicking on a link on a social media platform that members of the public discover newspaper articles about science.



'When something scary happens, that's when the stakes are high and that's also when the public are listening. That's when we most need to hear from experts – it's an opportunity to get the best experts and reliable information and evidence out there. For scientists to be ready to engage at those times, having some practice during 'peace time' and getting used to meeting journalists and seeing their names next to quotes in the media is a good idea, and these are all opportunities to ensure the public are hearing from good experts.'

Fiona Lethbridge, Senior Press Manager, Science Media Centre



The public want and need to hear from experts, and successive IPSOS polls have found that doctors and scientists are considered the most trusted professionals. Although excessively technical details should be simplified, panellists urged participants not to 'underestimate the public: they can cope with complex information and uncertainty'. Specialist health and science journalists are comfortable with conversations about, for example, evidence, and expect to hear scientists sometimes respond with 'I don't know'.

'There were unresolved discussions, however, about how transparent to be about the discovery process. For example, what would be the reaction if pharma companies were more open about the fact that medicines in development are tested on animals, as required by law?

A more positive point was that greater media coverage may attract the scientists of the future. Could pharmaceutical companies modify how they communicate to target groups of young people and inspire them to want to work in the industry?

There was a sense that people assume that the industry is populated exclusively by scientists and that the only career path available followed a traditional graduate route. However, not only is there a diversity of roles within pharma, but organisations are also crying out for people with different perspectives and from different backgrounds. Apprenticeships are available (and not just for school-leavers), and organisations are introducing a variety of methods – from 'blind' CVs to intentionally diverse shortlists and 'reverse mentoring' – to improve diversity and inclusivity in recruitment.

But there is more to be done to understand how to bring a more diverse mix of colleagues into the organisation and create an environment where all colleagues to feel genuinely included. Colleagues have to feel that they have examples and role models of people who are just like them.

Key takeaways

- If you are a scientist, every occasion on which you speak to a journalist during 'peacetime' should be seen as an opportunity to educate the public about the process and principles of scientific discovery. This shores up knowledge and balance for when something goes wrong or when there is a scare story.
- Scientists are often uneasy when asked to talk about topics outside their areas of specialism (policy, for example). Improved media training and continual practice will make them more confident in talking to journalists and more able to control what they are prepared to talk about.
- Initiatives to attract a diverse pool of talent must be matched by intentional strategies for recruitment and changes in behaviour to ensure that colleagues from any background feel welcomed and included in the industry.



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Conclusions:
Action points for the future
Beyla Austin-Morris
General Manager UK & Ireland, Tokopedia

Conclusions:
Action points for the future
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General Manager UK & Ireland, Tokopedia

Conclusion and recommendations for action



The 'key takeaways' identified throughout this report suggest matters for reflection and action for individual companies and other organisations to improve their understanding in the areas of purpose, reputation, and trustworthiness.

However, there were also two broad themes that emerged throughout the day which suggested where work could and should be done by the UK pharmaceutical industry collectively. This is where the ABPI can take the lead in supporting and working with its members.

Purpose and profit

A number of participants spoke about 'the profit motive' as a given, seemingly accepting as accurate the perception that, as profit-making businesses, pharmaceutical companies are necessarily motivated purely or primarily by profit. In fact, given their actions, what participants said during the day, and the actual purpose statements of members that were shared during Rupert Younger's presentation, they are the definition of purpose-driven businesses.

Companies need to get past their own uneasiness about making a profit and find ways to talk about their purpose, and profit as an outcome of delivering on that purpose. The SCORE framework shared by Rupert Younger is a good starting point. There is also potential for increasing transparency about how research and development is funded, how pharmaceutical companies operate, and about the profits that they make.

Communication and the ABPI Code of Practice

There can be a fine line between communication and promotion. Comments and questions during the day suggested that many pharmaceutical companies are so concerned about stepping over this line and contravening the ABPI Code of Practice that they hardly communicate at all. However, the discussion about the success of the COVID vaccine programme, the recommendations contained in the SCORE framework, and the presentations from patient organisations and other partners all called for more and better communication with all audiences and across all media.

There is an opportunity for ABPI to work with its members and with regulators to revisit the Code and clarify how far pharmaceutical companies are able to communicate about individual products and about their structure, activities, and purpose. The Code exists for a reason, but comments during the day suggest that overly risk-averse approaches to compliance can stifle creativity and indeed could even prevent full transparency.





About the ABPI

The ABPI exists to make the UK the best place in the world to research, develop and use new medicines and vaccines.

We represent companies of all sizes who invest in discovering the medicines of the future. Our members supply cutting edge treatments that improve and save the lives of millions of people. We work in partnership with government and the NHS so patients can get new treatments faster and the NHS can plan how much it spends on medicines.

Every day, we partner with organisations in the life sciences community and beyond to transform lives across the UK.



The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry

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